

PATENT APPLICATION

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

In re the Application of

Simon TAM

Application No.: 10/602,739

Filed: June 25, 2003

Docket No.: 116367

For: SENSING CIRCUIT



CLAIM FOR PRIORITY

Commissioner for Patents
P.O. Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

Sir:

The benefit of the filing date of the following prior foreign application filed in the following foreign country is hereby requested for the above-identified patent application and the priority provided in 35 U.S.C. §119 is hereby claimed:

United Kingdom Patent Application No. 0214904.5 Filed June 27, 2002

In support of this claim, a certified copy of said original foreign application:

☒ is filed herewith.

It is requested that the file of this application be marked to indicate that the requirements of 35 U.S.C. §119 have been fulfilled and that the Patent and Trademark Office kindly acknowledge receipt of this document.

Respectfully submitted,

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16 June 2003

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APPLICATION NO.: U.S. Application No. 10/602,739
FILED: June 25, 2003
FOR: SENSING CIRCUIT
ATTORNEY DOCKET NO.: 116367

Request for grant of a patent

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1. Your reference

GBP13818A

2. Patent application number

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27 JUN 2002

0214904.5

3. Full name, address and postcode of the or of each applicant (underline all surnames)

00412331003

Patents ADP number (if you know it)

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If the applicant is a corporate body, give the country/state of its incorporation

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4. Title of the invention

SENSING CIRCUIT

5. Name of your agent (if you have one)

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Patents ADP number (if you know it)

07395486001

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Country

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Claim(s)	4
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Translations of priority documents

Statement of inventorship and right to grant of a patent (*Patents Form 7/77*)

1

Request for preliminary examination and search (*Patents Form 9/77*)

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Request for substantive examination (*Patents Form 10/77*)

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Signature

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Miller Sut Keyon

27th June 2002

12. Name and daytime telephone number of person to contact in the United Kingdom

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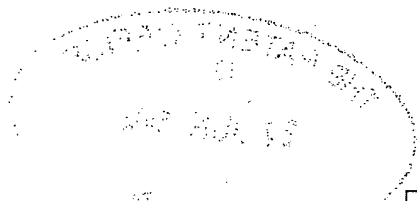
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1. Your reference	GBP13818A					
2. Patent application number <i>(if you know it)</i>	27 JUN 2002	0214904.5				
3. Full name of the or of each applicant	Seiko Epson Corporation					
4. Title of the invention	Sensing Circuit					
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6. How many, if any, additional Patents Forms 7/77 are attached to this form? <i>(see note (c))</i>						
7.	<p>I/We believe that the person(s) named over the page <i>(and on any extra copies of this form)</i> is/are the inventor(s) of the invention which the above patent application relates to.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Signature</td> <td style="width: 50%;">Date</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;"><i>Miller Shit Keayon</i></td> <td style="text-align: center;">27th June 2002</td> </tr> </table>		Signature	Date	<i>Miller Shit Keayon</i>	27th June 2002
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Enter the full names, addresses and postcodes of the inventors in the boxes and underline the surnames

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Patents ADP number (if you know it):

08413171001

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SENSING CIRCUIT

The present invention relates to sensing circuits.

Sensing circuits, usually in the form of sense amplifiers, are in widespread use. A sense amplifier is considered to be a vital component of a random access memory (RAM) system where its function is to provide recognition and amplification of the voltage level, representing digital information, stored in a memory element within a matrix of memory cells.

The matrix of memory cells can be regarded as a matrix of storage capacitors and the majority of existing sense amplifiers are based on voltage sensing of the charge stored in the storage capacitors. The voltage level across any storage capacitor corresponds to the logic state or information stored in the capacitor ('0' or '1'). In the simplest form of sensing circuit the level of the voltage across the storage capacitor is compared to an intermediate value and the difference is amplified to indicate whether the logic state '0' or '1' is stored in the capacitor. However, when the information is fed into the cell only a small amount of charge redistribution occurs in the storage capacitor and, hence, the level of the voltage stored in any storage capacitor of the memory cell array is very low. Therefore, it is difficult for the sense amplifier to differentiate between a logic '0' and logic '1' stored in any cell and, accordingly, very sensitive high gain amplifiers must be used, with the attendant increase in costs.

An improved form of sensing circuit has also been proposed in which the voltages of a pair of memory cells storing the digital information as complimentary logic are compared and positive feedback is used to amplify the minute voltage differences occurring between the pair of cells. However, because the voltage differences are minute, extremely sensitive high gain sense amplifiers must again be used.

It is also known to configure RAM circuits as a ferroelectric memory, where the conventional capacitors of the memory cell are constituted by ferroelectric capacitors. In

such ferroelectric RAMs, the logic state '0' or '1' corresponds to the polarisation state of the capacitor when the voltage applied across the ferroelectric capacitor is zero.

A typical characteristic for a ferroelectric capacitor is shown in Figure 1. It can be seen from Figure 1 that the ferroelectric capacitors have two polarisation states and also exhibit dielectric hysteresis. To switch such a ferroelectric capacitor from one polarisation state to the other polarisation state, dependent upon the current polarisation state of the capacitor, either a negative voltage pulse having a magnitude which is more negative than a voltage $-V_c$ or a positive voltage pulse having a magnitude which is more positive than a voltage V_c must be applied to the cell. Thus, to write information such as the logic state '1' into the cell, a negative write pulse of magnitude V_w is applied, which is more negative than the voltage $-V_c$ and results in a charge $Q_{1'}$ being stored in the cell. The detection of the polarisation state of the cell, i.e. whether a charge $Q_{1'}$ or $Q_{0'}$ is stored, is performed by applying a positive read pulse of magnitude V_R , which is more positive than the voltage V_c , and checking whether there is any switch in the polarisation state of the cell. For example, assuming that the logic state '1' is initially stored in the cell. The charge stored in the ferroelectric capacitor is therefore $Q_{1'}$, as shown in figure 1. The application of the read pulse V_R would cause the ferroelectric capacitor to switch polarisation states, resulting in a charge $Q_{0'}$ after the cessation of the read pulse. The change in charge $Q_{1'} - Q_{0'}$ indicates that the information stored in the cell was the logic state '1'. However, if the logic state '0' was initially stored in the cell, the application of the positive read pulse V_R would not cause the ferroelectric capacitor to change polarisation states. Hence, because a change in polarisation state has not occurred, the change in charge is minimal and this indicates that the logic state '0' was stored in the cell.

A switch in the polarisation state gives rise to an outflow of charge, which is detected by a sense amplifier. However, it can be seen from Figure 1 that when the read pulse V_R is applied and a change in polarisation occurs, the charge in the ferroelectric capacitor has changed from $Q_{1'}$ to $Q_{0'}$; the charge does not return to $Q_{1'}$ unless a negative pulse of magnitude more negative than at least $-V_c$ is applied. Hence, the initially stored

logic state is erased when the change in polarisation state occurs and the stored data is lost and must be replenished if it is required subsequently for another purpose. Because the stored logic state is lost, this reading of the information in the cell is known as destructive readout.

It has been proposed to modify the voltage sensing sense amplifier to sense any charge flowing out from the ferroelectric capacitor, and such a circuit is shown schematically in Figure 2. Generally, a ferroelectric dynamic RAM cell comprises a bit line BL, the voltage on which when information is read from the cell is indicative of the logic state stored in the cell, and a word line WL for the simultaneous application of read signals to a row of ferroelectric capacitors, the ferroelectric capacitor C_{FE} shown in figure 2 being one of this row of capacitors. An amplifier 2 is coupled to the bit line BL to provide an output signal O/P in response to any charge flowing from the ferroelectric capacitor arising from any change in the polarisation state when the cell is read. A bit line reference capacitor C_{BL} is provided which is connected to the bit line BL, and the change in charge due to a switch in polarisation of the ferroelectric capacitor is reflected as a change in voltage across the reference capacitor C_{BL} . This voltage appears on the bit line BL and is amplified by the amplifier 2 to provide the output signal O/P.

In order to provide a swing in the output signal O/P of reasonable magnitude, the value of the reference capacitor C_{BL} must be kept relatively small. The problem with this sensing technique is that if there is a switch in polarisation of the ferroelectric capacitor C_{FE} , the voltage stored in the reference capacitor C_{BL} will reduce the effective voltage between the word line WL and the bit line BL. This makes it difficult to use a small excitation or read voltage V_R , as shown in Figure 1, to interrogate the cell so as to reduce overall power consumption of the cell array. It is possible to reduce the size of the reference capacitor C_{BL} by reducing the size of the storage cells but if the polarisation state does change, the charge stored is also reduced and, therefore, there is less voltage at the output to the amplifier 2, which in turn means that the amplifier 2 must be made more sensitive to provide a sufficient change in output signal O/P with a change in polarisation state.

Also, it is known that dynamic RAM cells exhibit bit line capacitance which is intrinsic to the memory cell layout and cannot be reduced. As the value of the reference capacitor C_{BL} is made smaller with reducing cell size in order to achieve more cells per bit line and greater overall memory capacity, a limit to the memory capacity can easily be reached because the bit line capacitance becomes large when compared to the reference capacitor C_{BL} and will dominate. This results in a drastic reduction in the swing of the bit line voltage during readout, which necessitates the use of very sensitive and very high gain amplifiers to achieve reliable readout, with their attendant higher costs.

The present invention seeks therefore to provide an improved form of sense amplifier which, in a preferred application, enables the memory capacity of a RAM system to be increased and which also enables the memory cell and hence the system power consumption to be decreased.

According to a first aspect of the present invention, there is provided a sensing circuit for sensing an electrical charge stored in a capacitor element comprising a charge integrator circuit arranged to receive an electrical charge from a capacitor element and a discriminator circuit coupled in series with the charge integrator circuit. Preferably, the charge integrator circuit comprises an amplifier, a feedback capacitor coupled between an input terminal and an output terminal of the amplifier for storing electrical charge received from the capacitor element, and switching means connected in parallel with the feedback capacitor.

Alternatively, the charge integrator circuit comprises an amplifier, a feedback capacitor coupled between an input terminal and an output terminal of the amplifier for storing electrical charge received from the capacitor element, first switching means coupled to one side of the feedback capacitor for connecting the said one side to a first electrical supply, and second switching means coupled to the other side of the feedback capacitor for coupling the said other side to a further electrical supply.

Advantageously, the discriminator circuit comprises a comparator circuit having a first input arranged to receive an output signal from the charge integrator circuit and a second input arranged to receive a reference voltage signal.

In an alternative arrangement, the discriminator circuit comprises an inverter circuit arranged to provide an output signal which changes from a first level to a second level, which differs from the first level, when the magnitude of an output signal from the charge integrator circuit exceeds a reference value.

In accordance with a second aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of sensing a charge stored in a capacitor element comprising coupling the capacitor element to a charge integrator circuit arranged in series with a discriminator circuit.

The present invention also provides a random access memory circuit, or a biosensor, such as a DNA sensor or a fingerprint sensor, or a charge coupled device such as a camera or microscope, incorporating a sensing circuit according to the first aspect of the present invention.

The present invention will now be described by way of further example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:-

Figure 1 shows a typical charge-voltage characteristic for a ferroelectric capacitor;

Figure 2 shows a voltage sensing sense amplifier for use with a ferroelectric memory;

Figure 3 shows a circuit for the detection of data stored in a ferroelectric memory and incorporating a sensing circuit in accordance with the present invention;

Figure 4 shows waveform timing diagrams for the operation of a sensing circuit according to the present invention;

Figure 5 shows an alternative embodiment of a charge integrator circuit for use in the circuit illustrated in figure 3; and

Figure 6 shows the output voltage of the charge integrator illustrated in figure 5 during a sensing cycle.

Referring to Figure 3, a sensing circuit according to the present invention comprises an integrator circuit 4 which is coupled in series with a discriminator circuit 6. The integrator circuit 4 comprises an amplifier 8 with a feedback capacitor 10 and switching means SAS connected in parallel with the feedback capacitor 10.

The amplifier 8 has a first inverting input which can be coupled to a ferroelectric RAM cell 12 via first switching means BLS and a second non-inverting input which is connected to ground.

The discriminator circuit 6, in the embodiment shown comprises a comparator having a first input coupled to the output of the charge integrator 4 and a second input connected to a reference voltage source VREF. The output of the discriminator 6 is coupled via an enable circuit 14 and a buffer circuit 16 to an output terminal 18 at which is provided the output logic.

The enable circuit 14 is in the form of an AND circuit having one input which is connected to receive an output signal from the discriminator 6, and a second input which is coupled to receive an enable signal SEN.

The RAM 12 comprises a matrix array of memory cells arranged in rows and columns and any cell of the array can be selectively addressed by the application of appropriate signals along word lines and bit lines which selectively connect to the cells of the array. For simplicity only one row of such memory cells is shown in figure 3. From this figure it can be seen that, in essence, each row of the array consists of a number of ferroelectric capacitors C_{FE} connected to a bit line BL and, due to the intrinsic layout of the cell, each row of the array also includes a bit line capacitance C_1 . Each cell of the row is also connected to a respective word line WL. Each cell of the RAM 12 may be interrogated in a serial manner in order to determine the logic state stored in each cell and, hence, in use, the RAM 12 can be regarded at any point in time as comprising an active cell

20 in combination with a number of inactive cells, such as the inactive cells 22 of the row of cells shown in Figure 3.

The word line WL of the active cell 20 is connected to a signal source 24 which can supply "word active read" WAR and "word active write" WAW signals, as shown in Figure 4. The inactive cells 22 are connected by their respective word lines to a signal source 26 which can supply "word inactive read" WIR and "word inactive write" WIW signals to the word lines of the inactive cells 22.

A node 28 between the switch BLS and the RAM 12 is coupled via a further switch BLD to a bit line driver circuit in the form of a signal source 30, which is used to precharge or write data into the cells of the RAM 12. The signal source 30 can selectively supply "bit inactive read" BIR, "bit inactive write" BIW, "bit active read" BAR and "bit active write" BAW signals to the bit line BL of the RAM through the switch BLD.

The switches SAS, BLS and BLD are shown schematically in Figure 3 as contact switches but in practice these switches would be constituted by any suitable solid state switching device, such as MOSFETs or thin film transistors.

The sensing circuit of the present invention is based upon an operational amplifier which integrates the charge received from the active cell 20. Because one input of the operational amplifier is coupled to earth, the bit line voltage also is effectively clamped at virtual earth. This maximises the voltage swing across the ferroelectric capacitor and, therefore, the charge output from the active cell 20 when there is a switch in polarisation of the active cell. As the voltage on the bit line BL is effectively fixed at virtual earth, the effect of the bit line capacitance is also reduced and does not dominate. Hence, the feedback capacitor 10 of the charge integrator 4 can be selected to be of much smaller capacitance value, thereby increasing the charge to voltage conversion gain and providing good circuit sensitivity.

In operation, firstly the switch BLS is open and the switch BLD is closed and the bit active write BAW signal is fed to the bit line BL from the signal source 30. At the same time, the word inactive write WIW signal is fed to the word lines of the inactive cells 24 by the signal source 26 and the word active write WAW signal is fed to the word line of the active cell 20. The voltage magnitude of the combination of the two write signals BAW and WAW applied between the word line and bit line of active cell 20 is more negative than the voltage $-V_c$ shown in Figure 1, and hence data is stored in the active cell as a charge Q_1 , with zero voltage then being applied across the active cell with the cessation of the signals BAW and WAW.

A timing diagram for a typical read cycle is shown in Figure 4. To read the stored data, firstly the switch SAS is closed to discharge and therefore reset the feedback capacitor 10 of the charge integrator 4. The switch SAS remains closed until time A shown in Figure 4 and the period A to B shown in Figure 4 is the time required for switch SAS to open. Shortly before time A, at time C, the switch BLD, which was closed to couple the signal source 30 to the RAM 12, is opened to disconnect the bit line from the signal source 30 and the switch BLS is closed to couple the first or non inverting input of the amplifier 8 to the bit line BL of the RAM 12 and hence also to the active cell 20. These timings for the operation of switches SAS, BLS and BLD can be seen in Figure 4.

Charge integration is able to commence from time B when the switch SAS is open and continues until the time when the switch SAS is once again closed to reset the capacitor 10. This timing for the closure of the switch SAS is shown as time D in Figure 4. However, in view of the characteristic of the ferroelectric capacitor C_{FE} , as shown in Figure 1, it is necessary to excite the ferroelectric capacitor in order to determine whether there is a switch in polarisation state. This is achieved by applying the signals WAR and BAR to the active cell 20 and the signals WIR and BIR to the inactive cells 22. The waveforms and timings for these signals are also shown in Figure 4.

The RAM actually comprises a matrix array of memory cells, and only one row of this matrix array is actually shown in figure 3. Thus, when a bit line and a word line of the

array are made active at any particular point in time, the RAM will include, in essence, an active cell and three forms of inactive cell.

The cell at the cross-over point between the active bit and word lines becomes an active cell. An example is the active cell 20 for the row of cells shown in figure 3, which is at the cross-over point of the active word line WL and the active bit line BL. However the RAM will also include cells on this active bit line which remain inactive because their respective word lines are inactive (inactive cells at the cross-over between an inactive bit line and active word line), such as the inactive cells 22 shown in figure 3. Also, the RAM will include inactive cells which are coupled to the active word line but which remain inactive because their bit lines are inactive (inactive cells at the cross-over between an active word line and an inactive bit line), such as the cells in another row of the matrix (not shown in figure 3) which are coupled to the word line WL. Furthermore, the RAM will also include inactive cells which are at the cross-over point of an inactive word line and an inactive bit line, such as cells of another row of the matrix (not shown in figure 3) which also are not coupled to the active word line WL shown in figure 3.

For the inactive cells of the RAM which are at the cross-over between an active bit line and an inactive word line, such as the inactive cells 22 of the row of cells shown in figure 3, the signals BAR and WIR are applied respectively to the bit and word lines of these cells.

For the inactive cells of the RAM which are at the cross-over between an inactive bit line and an inactive word line, the signals BIR and WIR are applied respectively to the bit and word lines of these cells.

For the inactive cells of the RAM which are at the cross-over between an inactive bit line and an active word line, the signals BIR and WAR are applied respectively to the bit lines and word lines of these cells.

It can be seen from Figure 4 that the signal WIR is a constant level signal, which is applied throughout the sensing cycle. The signal BIR is a pulse which is applied to the inactive cells 22 throughout the period of charge integration, i.e. the period during which the switch SAS remains open, shown as the period B to D in figure 4. In the example shown in Figure 4, the signal BIR has a duration of about $100\mu\text{S}$, lasting from about $30\mu\text{S}$ after the commencement of the sensing cycle until about $20\mu\text{S}$ prior to the termination of the sensing cycle. The signal BIR is applied shortly before and terminates shortly after completion of the charge integration period, the voltage between the bit and word lines of the inactive cells is stable throughout the sensing cycle. The combinations of signals BAR-WIR, BIR-WAR, and BIR-WIR each provide a voltage between the bit and word lines of all of the inactive cells throughout the charge integration period of magnitude X, as shown in Figure 4, and this value X is less than the voltage V_c shown in Figure 1, so that these cells all remain inactive for the duration of the charge integration period B to D.

Similar to the signal BAR, the signal BIR is also a pulse signal and this is applied to the bit line of the active cell at the same time and for the same duration as the pulse signal BIR applied to the bit lines of the inactive cells 22. However, the pulse signal BAR is of opposite polarity to the pulse signal BIR. Because the pulse signals BIR and BAR are applied at the same time and for the same duration, this means that, conveniently, they may be supplied from the common signal source 30, with one of the pulse signals being passed through an inverter to provide the two pulse signals of opposite polarity. This assists in minimising the circuit requirements for the signal sources for the sensing circuit.

For the active cell 20, as shown in figure 3, which is located at the crossover of an active bit line BL and an active word line WL, the pulse signal BAR is applied to the bit line from the signal source 30 and the pulse signal WAR is applied to the word line from the signal source 24. The signal BAR is a pulse of about $100\mu\text{S}$ duration which is applied to the active cell 20 throughout the period of charge integration; i.e. for at least the period during which the switch SAS remains open, shown as the period B to D in figure 4. In the example shown in figure 4 the signal WAR has a period of about $50\mu\text{S}$.

The pulse signal WAR is applied to the word line of the active cell 20 almost immediately after opening of the switch SAS; i.e effectively at the start of the charge integration period. The signal pulse WAR is arranged to have a duration of about $50\mu\text{S}$ and the signal pulse BAR is present on the bit line BL prior to the opening of the switch SAS. The combination of signal pulses WAR-BAR therefore causes a voltage Y, as shown in Figure 4, to be applied to the active cell 20 for the duration of the signal pulse WAR during the sensing cycle. The voltage Y exceeds the voltage V_c shown in Figure 1 and is sufficient therefore to excite the ferroelectric capacitor of the active cell and cause the capacitor to change polarisation states. Because the signal WAR is applied to the active cell almost in coincidence with the commencement of the charge integration period, the ferroelectric capacitor can be excited for a sufficiently long period to ensure that charge transfer can be completed. In the example shown, the pulse signal WAR has a duration of $50\mu\text{S}$, which leaves sufficient time during the sensing cycle to apply a sense enable pulse SEN to the enable circuit 14 and to operate the switches SAS, BLS and BLD in readiness for the next cycle. However, it should be realised that whilst certain specific timings and pulse durations are shown in figure 4, these are merely exemplary and faster timing and therefore a more concise sensing cycle could be achieved. Furthermore a faster amplifier in the charge integrator circuit 4 and/or a ferroelectric material with a faster response timing could also be used.

With regard to pulse timings, the sense pulse SEN is shown in figure 4 as occurring at a timing N shortly after the cessation of the signal pulse WAR. Because there is a change in polarisation, a net amount of charge Q, which is equal to the change in charge $Q_0 - Q_1$ shown in Figure 1, flows into the capacitor 10 of the integrator circuit 4. When the charge transfer is complete and the voltage V_{OUT} at output terminal 32 of the charge integrator circuit 4 has reached a steady state condition, the voltage V_{OUT} is given by the formula:-

$$V_{\text{OUT}} = V_{\text{os}} - \frac{Q}{C_{\text{fb}}}$$

where V_{os} is the input offset voltage at the non-inverting input of the amplifier 8 and C_{fb} is the value of the feedback capacitor 10. As mentioned above, V_{os} can be held at virtual earth and the value of the intrinsic bit line capacitance does not dominate so C_{fb} , the value of the feedback capacitor 10, can be made very small. Hence, a relatively large swing in the output voltage V_{OUT} can be obtained for relatively small values of Q . The change in the voltage V_{OUT} which occurs at the output terminal 32 of the charge integrator 4 is also shown in figure 4. At the start of the charge integration period the voltage V_{OUT} is at virtual earth and the change in charge which is fed out from the active cell 20 and which flows into the capacitor 10 causes the charge integrator output voltage to go negative. The extent to which the charge integrator output voltage goes negative is dependent upon whether there is a logic '1' or a logic '0' stored in the active cell 20. If a logic '1' is stored the voltage V_{OUT} goes more negative than if a logic '0' is stored because, in the case of logic '1', there is a change in the polarisation state of the active cell and thus there is a larger net amount of charge which flows into and charges the capacitor 10. However, in either case the charge transfer is completed relatively quickly during the sensing cycle and the output voltage V_{OUT} adopts one of two steady state negative values, dependent upon a stored logic '0' or a logic '1', as shown in figure 4. The sense pulse SEN can therefore be applied at any time after the charge transfer is complete and the output voltage V_{OUT} has adopted one or the other of these steady state values. Thus, the sense pulse can also be applied before the termination of the signal pulse WAR, as shown by timing M in figure 4, which can give rise to an overall reduction in the time period for the sensing cycle.

The output voltage V_{OUT} is compared to the voltage V_{REF} in the comparator circuit of discriminator 6 and the voltage at output 34 of discriminator 6 is arranged to be at $+V$ volts when the voltage at output 32 exceeds the voltage V_{REF} and $-V$ volts when the voltage at output 32 is less than the voltage V_{REF} . Hence, a very positive swing in the voltage at output 34 is obtained, even for relatively small values of charge Q fed from the active cell when a change in polarisation state occurs.

The voltage of $+V$ volts at output 34 is fed to one input of enable circuit 14 which is in the form of an AND circuit. The other input of the AND circuit receives a signal from the voltage source SEN and this signal is in the form of a short pulse which occurs during the integration period. Hence, a pulse of magnitude $+V$ volts occurs at the output of enable circuit 14 which is fed through the buffer circuit 16 to output 18.

It will be realised from the above description that a very positive indication of a change in polarisation of the active cell, and hence the logic status of the active cell, is provided at the output 18 even for relatively small values of Q . Furthermore, because a sense amplifier based on charge integration is used, there is no reduction in the effective voltage between the word line and the bit line of the active cell when a change in polarisation occurs and hence a relatively small excitation voltage can be used, with reduced power consumption. Moreover, because the bit line voltage is effectively clamped at virtual earth, the voltage swing across the ferroelectric capacitor, and therefore the output charge when there is a switch in polarisation, can be maximised. Additionally, as the bit line voltage is fixed, the effect of the intrinsic bit line capacitance is reduced which means that the value of the feedback capacitor of the integrating sense amplifier can be made much smaller to maximise also the charge to voltage conversion gain.

In the embodiment shown in figure 3 the output voltage of the charge integrator 4 goes negative when charge integration occurs and thus the discriminator circuit 6 must be designed to handle negative input voltages. The reference voltage V_{REF} must also be provided as a negative voltage, which increases the complexity of the overall circuit design. Figure 5 shows an alternative embodiment for the charge integrator 4 which provides a positive voltage V_{OUT} to be provided at the output of the charge integrator and thus ensures that a positive voltage is always fed to the discriminator circuit 6. This also enables the reference voltage V_{REF} to be provided as a positive voltage, simplifying the overall circuit design.

The charge integrator 4 shown in figure 5 comprises the amplifier 8 and the feedback capacitor 10. The amplifier 8 is coupled to the word line and the bit line of the

circuit in the same manner as the embodiment shown in figure 3. However, in this embodiment the reset switch SAS is not provided and instead each side of the capacitor 10 is coupled via respective precharge switches V_{PRE1} and V_{PRE2} to appropriate voltage supply sources which enable the output of the charge integrator and thus the non inverting input of the discriminator 6 to be precharged to a positive voltage. Conveniently, V_{PRE1} and V_{PRE2} can be coupled, respectively, to virtual ground and to the positive supply voltage VDD for the sensing circuit.

In operation, when the charge integrator 4 of figure 5 is reset prior to commencement of a sensing cycle, the switches V_{PRE1} and V_{PRE2} are both closed. One side of the capacitor 10 is therefore connected to virtual ground through the switch V_{PRE1} and the other side of the capacitor, and hence the output of the charge integrator, is coupled to the positive supply voltage VDD. The output voltage is therefore in this embodiment precharged to the supply voltage VDD.

Figure 6 shows the voltage V_{OUT} at the output of the charge integrator during a sensing cycle for this embodiment. When the switches V_{PRE1} and V_{PRE2} are opened and the charge integration cycle commences, the change in charge of the active cell, which charges the capacitor 10, causes a negative swing in the output voltage V_{OUT} of the charge integrator 4. However, because the voltage V_{OUT} has been precharged to the positive supply voltage VDD, the output voltage V_{OUT} remains positive throughout the sensing cycle, as shown in figure 6. This embodiment is considered to be particularly beneficial as it enables the sensing circuit to operate solely with positive voltage signals, significantly simplifying overall circuit design.

The present invention has been described with reference to a single bit line of a RAM array. However, it will be realised that the integrating sense amplifier may also be connected to a group of bit lines, with the selection of any bit line being controlled by a multiplexor circuit. The present invention may therefore be used with high capacity non-volatile memory circuits whilst providing low power operation. It is particularly suitable therefore for use with portable light-weight equipment operating from an integral voltage

source, such as lap top computers. Furthermore, the integrating sense amplifier can be used with either active or passive matrix ferroelectric RAMs.

Because the present invention provides very efficient charge to voltage conversion, it can also be used in any application where it is required to sense very small changes in the level of charge such as biosensors, including fingerprint sensors and DNA sensors of the type in which detection is based upon storing an electrical charge on an electrode, and charge coupled devices, such as CCD cameras and microscopes.

The foregoing description has been given by way of example only and it will be appreciated by a person skilled in the art that modifications can be made without departing from the scope of the present invention. For example, in the embodiment described, the discriminator comprises a comparator circuit. However, an inverter circuit may be used in which the inverter output is arranged to switch between two levels when an output signal is received from the charge integrator circuit which exceeds a reference value. The inverter output may be arranged so that the output switches from a high to a low level when the reference value is exceeded, or vice versa.

CLAIMS:

1. A sensing circuit for sensing an electrical charge stored in a capacitor element comprising a charge integrator circuit arranged to receive an electrical charge from a capacitor element and a discriminator circuit coupled in series with the charge integrator circuit.
2. A sensing circuit according to claim 1, wherein the charge integrator circuit comprises an amplifier, a feedback capacitor coupled between an input terminal and an output terminal of the amplifier for storing electrical charge received from the capacitor element, and switching means connected in parallel with the feedback capacitor.
3. A sensing circuit according to claim 1, wherein the charge integrator circuit comprises an amplifier, a feedback capacitor coupled between an input terminal and an output terminal of the amplifier for storing electrical charge received from the capacitor element, first switching means coupled to one side of the feedback capacitor for connecting the said one side to a first electrical supply and second switching means coupled to the other side of the feedback capacitor for coupling the said other side to a further electrical supply.
4. A sensing circuit according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the discriminator circuit comprises a comparator circuit having a first input arranged to receive an output signal from the integrator circuit and a second input arranged to receive a reference voltage signal.
5. A sensing circuit according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the discriminator circuit comprises an inverter circuit arranged to provide an output signal which changes from a first level to a second level, which differs from the first level, when the magnitude of an output signal from the integrator circuit exceeds a reference value.

6. A sensing circuit according to any one of the preceding claims, comprising an enable circuit arranged to receive an output signal from the discriminator circuit on a first input and to provide an output signal indicative of the electrical charge or the capacitor element in response to a further signal received on a second input.
7. A sensing circuit according to any one of the preceding claims comprising first switching means to couple an input of the charge integrator circuit to the capacitor element.
8. A sensing circuit according to claim 7 comprising further switching means for coupling the first switching means to a bit line driver circuit.
9. A sensing circuit according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the capacitor element comprises a ferroelectric capacitor.
10. A sensing circuit according to any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein the capacitor element comprises a ferroelectric gate transistor.
11. A sensing circuit according to any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein the capacitor element comprises a charge coupled device.
12. A sensing circuit according to any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein the capacitor element comprises an electrode for storing electric charge.
13. A sensing circuit according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the capacitor element is arranged in an array of capacitor elements.
14. A sensing circuit according to claim 13, when appendant to claim 9 or claim 10, wherein the array comprises an active matrix array of capacitor elements.
15. A biosensor comprising a sensing circuit according to any of claims 1 to 8, or claim 12, or claim 13, when appendant to any one of claims 1 to 8 or claim 12.

16. A biosensor according to claim 15 comprising a DNA sensor.
17. A biosensor according to claim 15 comprising a fingerprint sensor.
18. A random access memory circuit comprising a sensing circuit according to anyone of claims 1 to 10, or claim 13 when appendant to any one of claims 1 to 10 or claim 14.
19. A charge coupled device camera device comprising a sensing circuit according to any one of claims 1 to 8, claim 11, or claim 13, when appendant to any one of claims 1 to 8 or claim 11.
20. A method of sensing a charge stored in a capacitor element comprising coupling the capacitor element to a charge integrator circuit arranged in series with a discriminator circuit.
21. A method according to claim 20, wherein the charge integrator circuit is selected to comprise an amplifier having a feedback capacitor coupled between an input and an output of the amplifier, and providing switching means coupled in parallel with the feedback capacitor.
22. A method according to claim 20, wherein the charge integrator circuit is selected to comprise an amplifier having a feedback capacitor coupled between an input and an output of the amplifier, and providing first switching means for coupling one side of the feedback capacitor to a first electrical supply, and second switching means for coupling the other side of the feedback capacitor to a further electrical supply.
23. A method according to claim 22, wherein the first electrical supply is selected to be virtual ground and the further electrical supply is selected to be a positive supply voltage, and wherein the method comprises closing the first and second switching means so as to

precharge an output terminal of the charge integrator circuit to the positive supply voltage prior to commencement of a sensing cycle.

24. A method according to claim 20 or 21, wherein the discriminator circuit is selected to comprise a comparator circuit having a first input arranged to receive an output signal from the charge integrator circuit and a second input arranged to receive a reference voltage signal.

25. A method according to claim 20 or 21, wherein the discriminator circuit is selected to comprise an inverter circuit arranged to provide an output signal which changes from a first level to a second level less than the first level when the magnitude of an output signal from the integrator circuit exceeds a reference value.

26. A method according to any one of claims 20 to 25 comprising providing first switching means for selectively coupling an input of the charge integrator circuit to the capacitor element.

25. A method according to claim 26 comprising providing further switching means for coupling the first switching means to a bit line driver circuit.

28. A method according to any one of claims 20 to 25 comprising feeding an output signal from the discriminator circuit to a first input of an enable circuit and providing a further signal to a second input of the enable circuit, thereby to provide an output signal indicative of the electrical charge on the capacitor element in response to the further signal.

29. A method according to claim 28, wherein the capacitor element is selected to comprise a ferroelectric capacitor and the method comprises applying a voltage pulse across the ferroelectric capacitor having a voltage magnitude sufficient for causing the ferroelectric capacitor to change from a first polarisation state to a second polarisation state, and providing the further signal to the enable circuit during the application of the voltage pulse across the ferroelectric capacitor.

ABSTRACT

A sensing circuit comprises a charge integrating sense amplifier 4 serially coupled to a discriminator 6. The sensing circuit can be used to sense the logic status of the cells in a random access memory (RAM) system, including ferroelectric RAMs. The use of a charge integrating sense amplifier enables the effect of bit line capacitance intrinsic to RAM circuits to be overcome and also provides efficient charge to voltage conversion gain.

Figure 3

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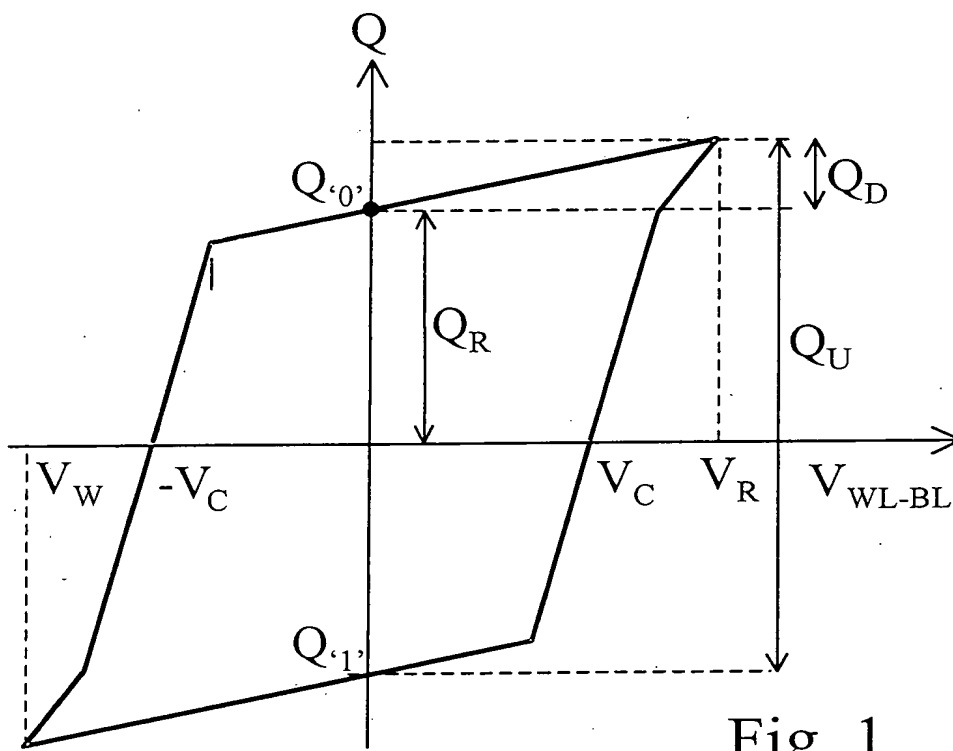


Fig. 1.

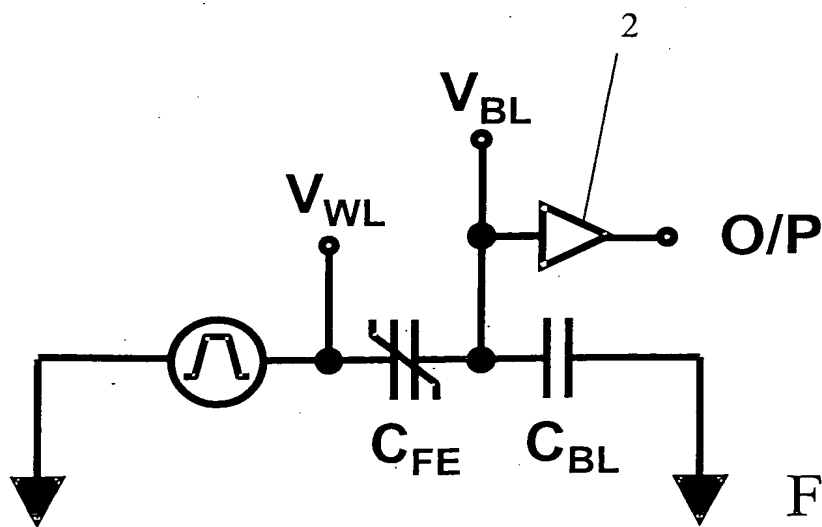


Fig. 2.



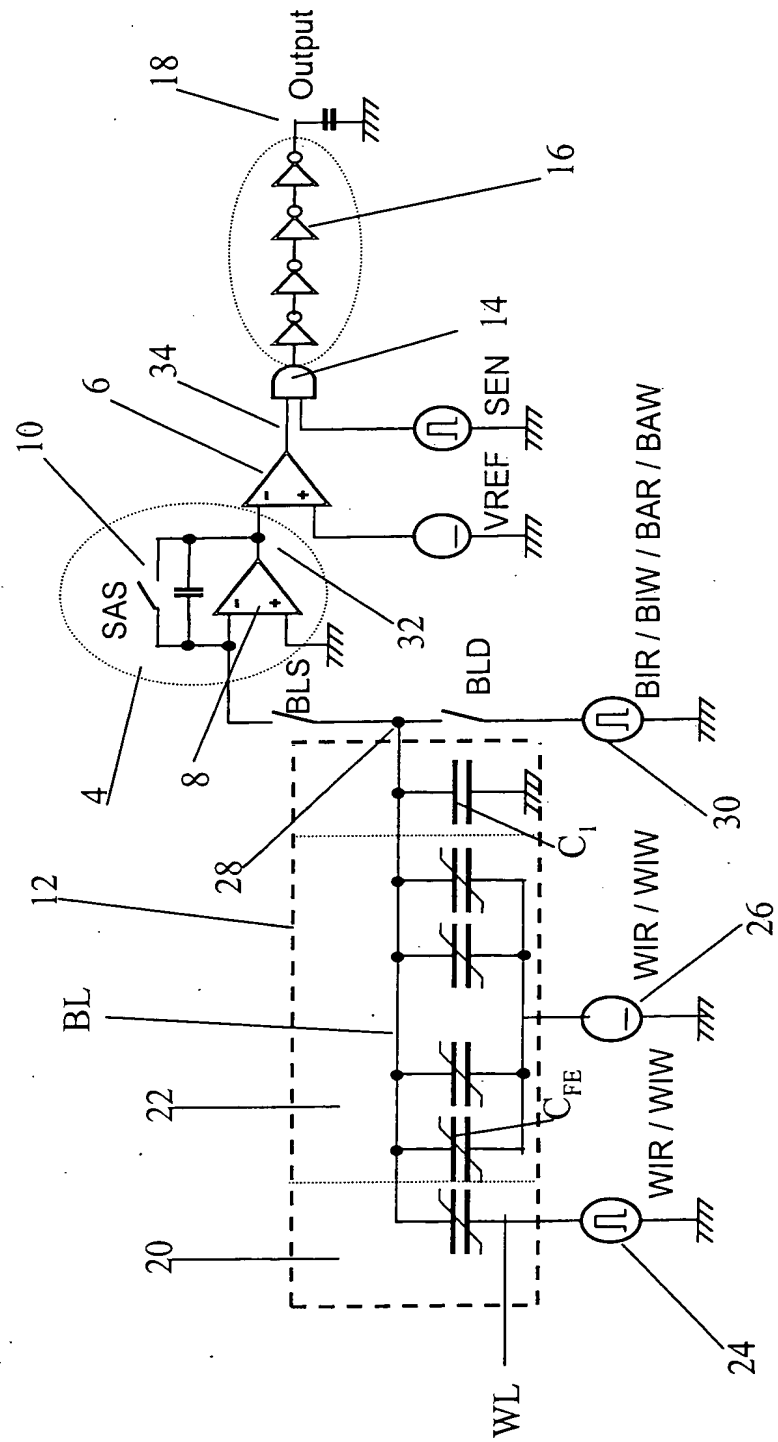


Fig. 3.



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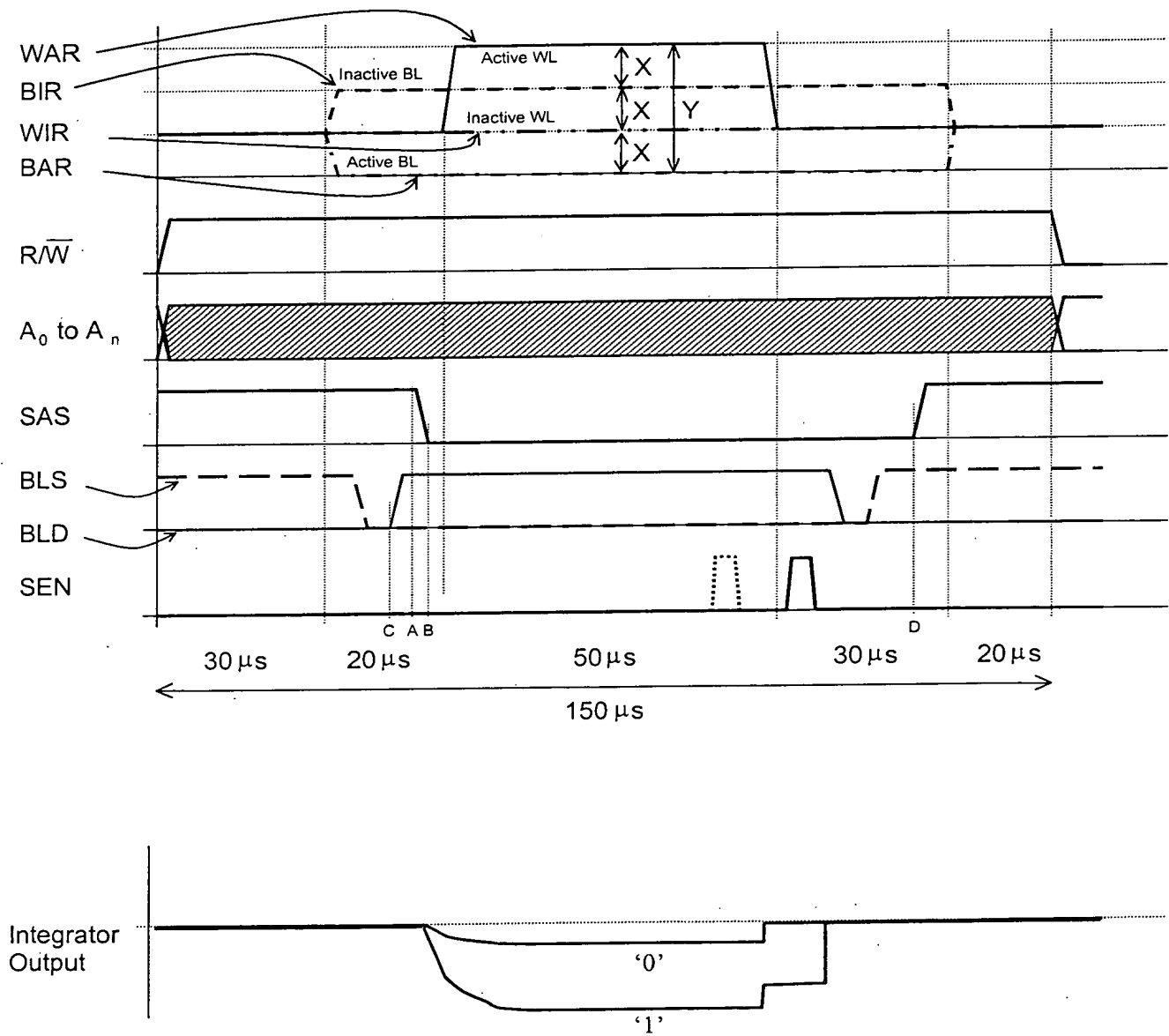


Fig. 4.



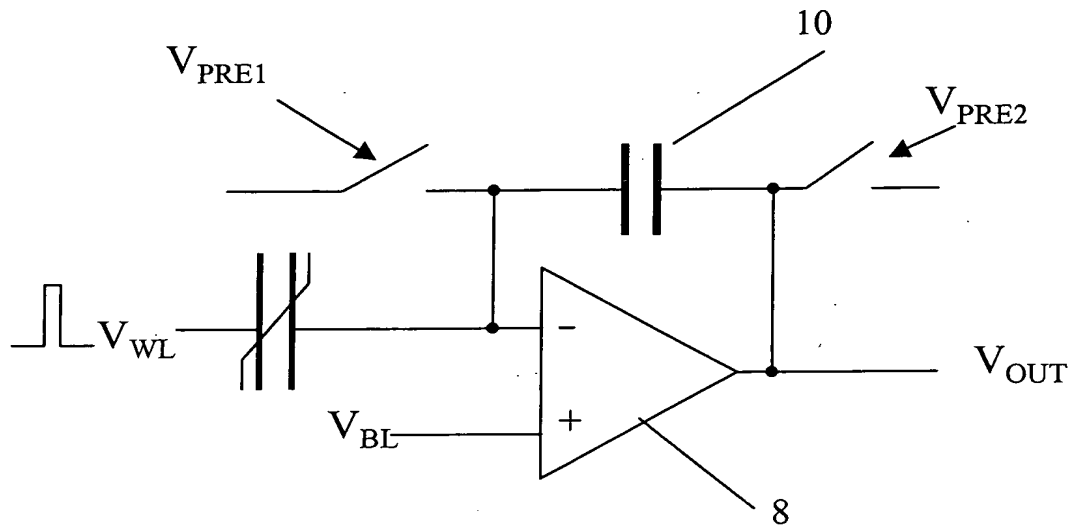


Fig.5.

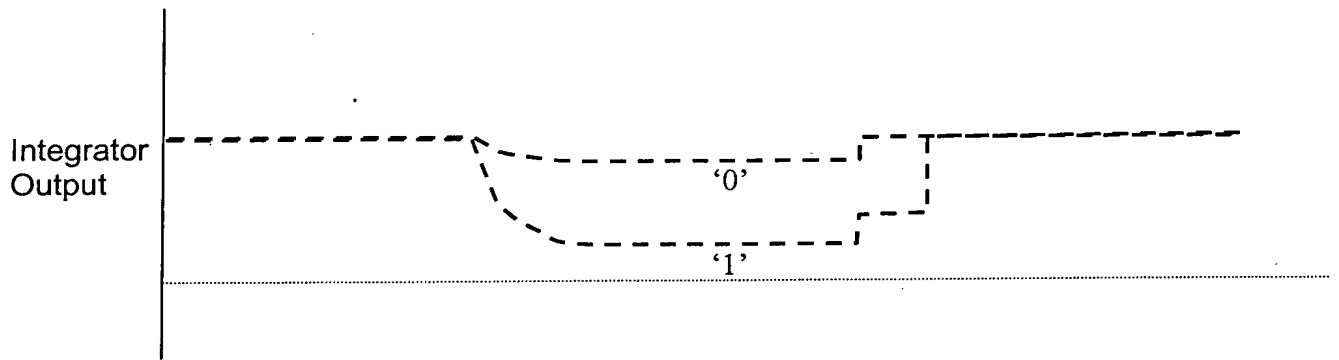


Fig. 6.

